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Public safety issues deserve honest talks

By Ray Knox, For the Express-News

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Much has been reported lately of the negotiations between the city of San Antonio and the unions that represent the city's police and firefighters. As the District 9 representative and chairman of the Parks and Recreation Board, I was briefed on the collective bargaining agreement, or CBA, negotiations between the city of San Antonio and the unions by the Healthcare and Retirement Benefits Task Force appointed by the mayor and City Council.

Currently, public safety is allocated 67 percent of the city's general fund. This amount pays salary, health care, pension and other benefits for uniformed officers. The remaining 33 percent covers all the remaining city departments and their operations, including civilian employees' benefits and other services. If no changes are made, the allocation for public safety will continue to grow and eventually there will be no funding left for roads, parks, libraries and other important services. This could happen by 2040, and as early as 2024 if we experience another economic slowdown.

One reason for the growth in public safety spending is the rising cost of health care and benefit costs covered by the CBA for uniform police and fire. San Antonio has more than 4,000 uniformed officers who enjoy some of the best overall benefits of any public safety department not only in Texas, but the entire U.S., because of their current contract. One of the outstanding benefits they receive is that uniform police and fire only pay 9 percent of their health care cost for their entire family. In contrast, civilian employees pay 30 percent of their health care costs.

So why do I care about the collective bargaining agreement or the city budget? I have many friends who are police and firefighters — first responders who put their lives on the line each day they suit up for duty. Their benefits are offered as incentive to help make them among the best in response time and service.

Likewise, I enjoy the wonderful parks, libraries and other amenities offered by the city through service and maintenance, and I really would like to experience better roads. Is it possible to achieve a balanced budget so all the citizens of San Antonio, uniformed and civilian alike, can experience the best quality of life that is fair and equitable?

During the 7 1/2 years I have had the privilege to serve on the Parks and Recreation Board, the review and implementation of the city's yearly budget has been a gut-wrenching experience. The economy has been sluggish or recessed during this time and the first to get the budget axe are citizen's services found in parks, libraries, charitable organizations, education services, and similar programs.

Last year's proposed cuts to park programs created a public outcry, so the city enacted a \$1-per-month surcharge on CPS bills to help fund park maintenance costs and continue to keep public swimming pools open. City parks are currently experiencing their greatest popularity and use, but still the funding necessary to maintain and preserve infrastructure cannot keep pace with their decline.

San Antonio is one of the fastest-growing cities in the U.S., and as the city continues to appeal to industry for relocation here with their workforce, the necessity to add more amenities such as parks, libraries, community programs, and better roads grows. This same growth, likewise, requires adding more uniformed officers to help provide the necessary safety and security.

So how does the city maintain an equitable and fair balance for all these services with the appropriate funding? This will require honest and sincere bargaining from all sides. It will take vision and planning of the future courageous enough to see the big picture for every citizen of San Antonio to experience the best quality of life. It will take some sacrifice and compromise in the next CBA to balance out what is being felt in all other departments in the city. San Antonio is a great city because of its citizens, and we need to lend support to the process and trust the ability of those bargaining for our future to do the right thing.

Ray Knox is the District 9 representative on the Parks and Recreation Board, and its presiding chairman.